MATÉRIEL FOR WAR PRODUCED BY BLIND

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By Charlotte R. Budd

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TAPPING his way with a cane, hesitant and a little weary, the blind broom man was a familiar figure on the streets of almost any American town 25 years ago. Mops and brooms were his only means of livelihood, and housewives his principal customers.

Today, door-to-door peddling of these items is, for the most part a thing of the past, although mops and brooms are still turned out in large quantities by the sightless.

Congress Changes Picture

For a number of years institutions for the blind had been supplying Federal agencies with a few items, but a regular purchasing program was not adopted until June 25, 1938, when Congress passed the Wagner-O'Day Act, directing Federal departments to buy brooms and mops and other suitable products from the blind. Since then Uncle Sam's purchases of blind-made products have been regular and substantial.

When the program first got under way, 36 workshops for the blind were participating, and during the first year of operation—the calendar year 1939—sales amounted to $220,000. At that time mops and brooms were the only articles purchased, but it wasn't long before "other suitable products," including pillowcases, sheets, sanitary swabs, mattresses, and cotton mailing bags, were being supplied. During the year ending June 15, 1943, the list of articles covered by the Government's $10,380,040 expenditure for blind-made products was headed by 19,316,196 pillowcases, 4,769,613 cotton mops, 3,651,000 cotton mailing bags, and 3,031,472 brooms. There are now 55 workshops and the total sales value of goods shipped to the Government since the beginning of the program has reached $18,000,000.

A large proportion of the material is purchased by the Navy. Many of the pillowcases made by the blind find their way overseas and some are used by the Medical Corps in hospital ships and in base hospitals both here and in other countries. A west coast organization is now making work trousers for the Army on special order, and a Kansas City organization has arranged to supply the Navy with ropes for hammock nettings.

More Buying Means More Jobs

During the calendar year 1942, when 53 workshops were participating in the program, employment was given to 2,519 blind persons, who received in wages $1,025,408 on Government sales amounting to $8,558,900.

The average blind worker, it has been found, after the required training produces at about 80 percent of the speed of the sighted factory operative on a similar job. Some greatly exceed this output, however, making records which would do credit to persons of normal vision. One girl in a Binghamton, N. Y., factory regularly hems 46 dozen pillowcases a day. In some workshops it is not unusual for an operator to earn as much as $90 a week. There is, in addition, a marked lack of absenteeism among blind workers.

Work turned out for Army and Navy contracts must conform to the same standards and specifications as that done by persons who can see. Items which fail to measure up are rejected. At first it was found necessary to turn down several shipments of pillowcases on naval contracts because of imperfections resulting from the inability of blind workers to follow a straight line. This situation was remedied in some cases by attaching a hemming marker to the machine as a finger guide.

A number of safety guards have been developed for the use of the sightless, and accident records show that such workers are injured less frequently than are persons who can see.

Ingenious use of confiscated pinball machines has been made by the American Foundation for the Blind in New York City, according to a recent newspaper account. Parts of the device are utilized in an "electric eye" guard for the protection of blind operators of electric sewing machines. This apparatus, perfected by the sound engineer of the foundation and a member of his staff, is believed to be the first in this field designed to protect sightless workers and to increase their efficiency. The guard has been developed during the past 8 months, but was suggested more than a year ago by the president of the Illinois Industries for the Blind.

Device Opens Opportunities

An electric bulb, similar to an automobile headlight, and a magnet are two articles taken from outlawed machines for the compact unit. About the size of a portable radio, this unit is operated from electric-light mains. Based on a photoelectric control system that is attached to the commercial model, the device brings the sewing machine to a complete and sudden stop the moment the operator's hand or finger approaches dangerously near the needle. The machine functions normally until the beam of light which is projected down upon the needle is intercepted by the worker's

Courtesy Paul Parker

The blind operate sewing machines in preparing bindings.

fingers entering the light circle. At the instant the light beam is thus broken, the photoelectric cell acts upon the amplifier, which in turn disconnects the drive motor. Buzzers which sound a warning to the operator when either the needle or the bobbin thread has broken are another feature of the attachment.

It is believed that the device can be extended to other types of machinery and thus, by eliminating danger of injuries, open to blind persons greater opportunities in the manufacturing field.

Committee Directs Program

Shortly after passage of the Wagner-O'Day Act, the President appointed a committee to supervise the Federal purchasing program. This committee was composed of one private citizen conversant with the problems incident to employment of the sightless, and one representative each of the following departments: Navy, War, Treasury, Agriculture, Commerce, and Interior.

The committee is now headed by Maj. Gen. Clifford Corbin, assistant quartermaster general, U. S. A. Secretary of the committee is Robert LeFevre, Treasury Department. Representing the various Government departments are: Ray Ward, Department of Agriculture, E. E. Eisenhart, Department of the Interior, Capt. W. C. Wallace, Navy Department, H. B. McCoy, Department of Commerce, and Clifton E. Mack, Treasury Department.

The committee's non-Government member, M. C. Migel, is president of the American Foundation for the Blind, and has been interested in the activities of sightless persons for more than 40 years. He was one-time chairman of the New York State Commission for the Blind. For 15 years he has conducted a vacation center known as Resthaven, in Monroe, N. Y., for sightless women. In 1941, the American Association of Workers for the Blind awarded him the Shotwell Memorial for his outstanding work.

Post-War Employment Studied

The committee is giving a great deal of consideration to post-war plans. It is the hope of this committee that employment of sightless workers, now so greatly expanding under wartime conditions, will continue at an increased rate in the post-war era. However, while the Government will continue to buy blind-made articles after the war, there will be a greatly lessened demand for a number of the items that now top the list. Considerable research will be necessary to discover articles which will take the place of these. A reasonably sizable output is essential to make production of blind-made articles profitable. Another factor in the employment situation is that blind women present more of a vocational problem than do blind men, since, as a rule, they are not so mechanically inclined.

New Fields Opening Up

Aside from opportunities which have developed as a result of legislative action, the past few years have opened up a tremendous field of new activities for the blind, who have entered into the war effort with wholehearted intensity well worth emulating. One outstanding example is the case of the 26-year-old "thread chaser" in an aircraft accessories factory, blind since birth, who was found to perform his work with such precision and accuracy that the company decided to hire other blind persons for similar operations.

Many such instances of efficiency in the industrial field give evidence that the sightless are fast stepping out of their limited sphere to fall in line with their normal-visioned neighbors. And they are helping the war effort in countless other ways.

Dramatic clubs have been organized by the blind, proceeds of their plays going to the National War Fund.

Sixteen blind women of the "Lighthouse" workers recently presented the Volunteer Service Headquarters of the American Red Cross with a large navy blue afghan, with a red cross in the center, for use of the Red Cross Army Base Hospital in Iceland.

Boy and Girl Scouts, some partly and others totally blind, worked a 6-acre Victory Garden this past summer. Markings in Braille were posted to indicate to the blind gardeners the location of the various garden products.

Pledge Aid to Government

A War Committee of the Blind, representing three organizations, was formed the early part of the year. This group pledged itself to "participate in whatever campaigns are planned by the Government and war agencies, and sell war stamps and bonds and collect rubber and scrap."

It is believed that with the continued help of the various foundations and institutions for the blind throughout the country, and with the impetus given by the efforts of the committee appointed under the act of Congress, the sightless will hurdle, one after another, the obstructions which, up to this time, have set them apart from persons of normal vision.

What of Vitamins—Fact or Fancy?

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vitamin content in flour has been modified upward. This action will automatically raise the food value of bread.

Other food groups to come under the project included sugar, milk, cornmeal, edible fats, and meats. With respect to meat, packers and distributors, before Pearl Harbor, had anticipated the need for research in this line. Extensive surveys were made to establish that meat products ranked high in nutritive value. In fact, pork, long regarded by the public as being one of the most indigestible foods, has been proved rich in vitamin content. And the public has been educated to the special food value of the less popular and cheaper items, such as beef heart.

Nor is the meat industry alone in its vigorous campaign to make a vitamin-conscious America aware of its products' high food value. Manufacturers of cereals and other packaged foods have been diligent in making known the healthful qualities of their products.

But while the promotion of foods via their vitamin content has been conducted untiringly, it in no way supplants the growth of the business of vitamins in concentrated form.

Drugs or Foods?

As a result of the widespread publicity given to such vitamins in recent years, they have become a coveted sales item to distributors in many lines. In fact, much discussion has arisen as to whether they should be classified as drugs or food.

Originally, the drug store was the only outlet, and, currently, purchases of vitamins are estimated to constitute 25 to 33 percent of total sales of retail drug products. But while this group still handles the greatest volume, and in 1942, according to trade estimates, accounted for 77.6 percent of the vitamin business, other distributors too are making a good showing. And, contrary to general opinion that grocers and supermarkets are the druggists' greatest competitors, market analyses reveal that mail-order houses and department stores enjoy this position. In 1942 they handled 8 and 6.9 percent of business, respectively, compared with 3.1 percent sold by grocers and supermarkets.

It is the opinion of one well-known drug concern that "people prefer to purchase vitamins in the drug store but will patronize whoever presents the most attractive selection in a departmentized manner." Certainly, a further stimulus to diverse outlets is the policy adopted by the Food and Drug Administration in September 1943 to the effect that, whether in individual form or in multiple combinations, vitamins are to be considered special dietary foods and not necessarily drug products.

Not Passing Fancy

There is every reason to believe that the vitamin business is not merely a passing fancy which will fade out of the picture shortly. Enormous potentialities are apparent from the fact that research is continually bringing to light new elements hitherto unknown or undeveloped. One new vitamin formula recently put on the market is reported to contain extra potencies of the B complex and of A, D, and C. Another—a vitamin-mineral combination—is claimed to contain eight high-potency vitamins and nine minerals.

And although the manufacturers at present are encountering difficulties, such as scarcity of new machinery and inability to obtain certain of the rarer varieties of vitamins, among them B, they plan for a bigger and better business after the war.

In fact, they anticipate a greatly increased demand for vitamin products in post-war years. The groundwork for their sustained use has been well laid both through the medical profession and